



---

Grzegorz, Blanka ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5432-7234> (2020) Book review: Imagining Sameness and Difference in Children's Literature: From the Enlightenment to the Present Day. International Research in Children's Literature, 13 (2). pp. 355-357. ISSN 1755-6198

---

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/627756/>

**Version:** Accepted Version

**Publisher:** Edinburgh University Press

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2020.0370>

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

***Imagining Sameness and Difference in Children's Literature: From the Enlightenment to the Present Day.* Eds. Emer O'Sullivan and Andrea Immel. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 284 pages.**

Reading may forge new cross-national and cross-cultural insights, but it does so within the limits of the comprehensible. *Imagining Sameness and Difference in Children's Literature* considers the sympathetic identifications and disavowals that reading can entail, sometimes both at once, across a wide spectrum of children's writers' responses produced over the past two hundred years as an answer to the cultural realities of several Western European countries as well as Russia and the United States. This essay collection approaches the idea of children's enculturation through literature from the point of view of the transformative – and formative – exchange that happens in the contact zones which are brought into focus by texts that move across cultural, ethnic or national boundaries. Throughout, the book asserts an interest in the interrelation of the aesthetic and representational dimensions of children's fiction and non-fiction from eighteenth-century English popular prints and Danish magazines for children and to twenty-first-century literary representations of cosmopolitan childhoods. O'Sullivan and Immel's excellent introduction is concerned with the parameters of identity politics that emerged in these contexts, and with the disjunctive fortunes of inter-cultural contact in which cultural withholdings and relativism are continuously present. The editors insist that considerations of the generic conventions, patterns and restrictions of writing for the young may in fact sharpen our attention to the operations of representation, giving insight into the role of children's literature as an instrument of social change. Their approach seeks to avoid treating the trajectory of the representations of cultural otherness in children's texts since the Enlightenment as primarily a narrative of progress towards tolerance and conviviality; instead, it asks how a greater critical emphasis on the fractured nature and complex history of portraying sameness and difference to young readers ultimately changes the ways in which we respond to contemporary works. The book's remaining chapters are organised around three thematic

groupings: Ethnography on Display, Internationalism and Tolerance, and Constructing Self and Nation.

Part One opens with Silke Meyer's discussion of the importance of 1780s prints and caricatures for children, especially those depicting stereotypical images and popular English (mis)representations of the French, the Dutch, and the Germans, in familiarising young English spectators at the time with conventional ways of seeing and thinking about nationality. In Chapter Three, Emer O'Sullivan demonstrates how late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century publications for and about English children (with a few notable exceptions of what O'Sullivan, after Lynne Vallone (2009), calls 'voyages of ethical discovery'<sup>1</sup>) were used to teach a form of cultural geography based on ethnotypes. This was presented, she writes, from a largely Anglocentric perspective that opposed Enlightenment ideas of tolerance towards cultural others. As Gillian Lathey argues in Chapter Four, adult manipulation of young people's responses to encounters with otherness at London's Great Exhibition of 1851, as depicted in publications for children, blurred the lines between linguistic, ethnic and national identities. This was in accordance with contemporary (pseudo)scientific language and colonial imaginary, the central dilemma contained in the tension between the organisers' rhetoric of international harmony and celebration of difference, and the reliance of these texts on reductive, racialised images or categories. In the section's last chapter, Amanda M. Brian focuses on how Lothar Meggendorfer's illustrated books for children, widely circulated not only in late nineteenth-century Germany but throughout Europe and America, introduced his young readers to the rigidity of contemporary national and racial categories to then destabilise them through humorous visual and verbal text.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Lynne Vallone's 'Ideas of Difference in Children's Literature,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, edited by M. O. Grenby and Andrea Immel, Cambridge UP, 2009, pp. 174-190.

The next section (Part Two) takes as its sources texts from outside the Anglo-American context and begins with late eighteenth-century Danish periodicals for children, as examined by Nina Christensen in the light of the ‘ideal citizen’ model of a good patriot, loyal subject and tolerant member of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation-state, which, she argues, was advocated by magazine publishers. In Chapter Seven, Cynthia J. Koepp identifies knowledge of diverse national cultures and respect for cultural otherness as the chief lessons to be learnt from Louis-François Jauffret’s play for girls, *Géographie Dramatique* (1807), which she nevertheless also sees as a good demonstration of the limits of the writer’s ability to enable concerned transcultural engagement, particularly with respect to his descriptions of Europeans’ encounters with Africans. Moving away from national or ethnic identities, Gabriele von Glasenapp’s chapter looks instead to constructions of religious difference in the illustrated information books published in Germany in late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; it finds what is presumably an unintended exoticisation of otherness in images counterpointing the information given in the books’ verbal text.

In Part Three, images of childhood and nationhood are shown to be instrumentalised in various literatures for young readers in order to stimulate and satisfy the needs of the producing culture. Lara Saguisag treats the critically neglected and short-lived cartoon series *On the Sidewalks of New York*, published in the late 1890s, as a cultural artefact of the Progressive Era, at once expressive of contemporary fears about and sympathy for the ethnic street urchin. Verena Rutschmann’s chapter looks at the construction of Russian self-images and representations of otherness during the brief heyday of the Russian picturebook between 1922 and 1934, arguing that the pre-1922 sense of national identity gave way to a new national self-confidence combined with eager internationalism, only to be overshadowed in the 1930s by political volatility and defensiveness against the other. The final two chapters focus on the novelistic perception of Canada as a counter-image for Germans during three periods of

twentieth-century German history and on nineteenth-century fictional responses to the American Revolution and the Franco-Prussian War respectively, with both Martina Seifert and Margaret R. Higonnet examining culture-specific conceptions of sameness and difference as serving these varieties of nation-building in strikingly different yet equally crucial ways.

Overall, these chapters on cross-cultural reading experiences indicate the kind of critical intervention that children's literature scholarship may make in asking how questions of form, perception and reception come together with writing *as cultural representation*, a rethinking of the importance of aesthetics for transcultural production that may be shared across cultural worlds and communities. Despite the collection's limited scope (which, though acknowledged as such, could surely have extended to crossing the borders of more than six countries), this book opens the way for a welcome transformation of our understanding of the dynamics and representation of cultural difference by the field of aesthetics.

Blanka Grzegorzcyk

University of Cambridge and Manchester Metropolitan University